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The Unquiet Metropolis: Navigating Urban Materialism and Rural Ethical Anchors in The Fiction of Sudha Murty

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Abstract

Sudha Murty's writing is always anchored in the clash between the burgeoning modernization of the nation and the shifting cultural landscape of India as the economy begins to transform. In her fiction, Murty depicts the struggle between the temptations of a materialist city and the strong ethical codes of the countryside, focusing on the lives of common people impacted by rising economic success, the benefits of education, and the ascent in society. The paper analyzes two novels, *Dollar Bahu* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* to discuss how Murty portrays city as a place that promises scope but also fosters emotional loneliness whereas country offers warmth and humility coupled with togetherness. Through Shamala and Vinuta in the former and Shrimati and Shrikant in the latter, Murty attempts to ask a pertinent question if material success can indeed offset the loss of the bond between humans. It is concluded that Murty's narrative neither idealises the country nor rejects the idea of moving forward. Murty presents an intermediary approach of integrating professional career and the ethics. It is observed that the notion of 'rooted modernism' advocated through education, aspiration, and global engagement is embedded within the very fabric of empathy, gratitude, and righteousness in Murty's fictional works.

Keyword: Sudha Murty, Urban Materialism, Rural Ethics, Feminism, Indian English Fiction, *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls The Bakula*.

Introduction

The divide between the rural and the urban has also been the primary interest in Indian literature in the present age. A town or a city is regarded as the nucleus of material prosperity, development of technology, individual initiative whereas a village or a town represents affections, cultural inheritance and moral stability. This disparity between rural and urban may also stand for social changes in post-liberalized India where economic development comes hand in hand with changing structure of the family and their ethics.

Sudha Murty in her stories elucidates the clash by the medium of simply but powerfully woven tales, predominantly of middle-class families.

Her work as described by the scholars represents an amalgam of traditional Indian ethics and modern worldliness. Murty does not seem to object the growth of the urban life, she is concerned more about the price of prosperity achieved without humility and affection.

This paper argues that characters yearn for urban riches, Murty suggests that no matter how prosperous they may become in cities if they don't remember values such as gratitude, compassion, self sacrifice, and community, as advocated in traditional Indian texts, they will feel a vacuum within. She, thus, emphasizes a right mix between materialism and morality through the plots of *Dollar Bahu* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*.

The Transactional Mirage: Materialism in *Dollar Bahu*

In *Dollar Bahu*, extreme admiration for money eventually converts human relationships to a purely economic transaction. The story is centred on the obsession of Gouramma, an old Indian woman, who favours her American daughter-in-law, Jamuna, over her Indian daughter-in-law, Vinuta, only because she is married to an American citizen and is living in America earning in dollars. The American dollar assumes a new dimension; not just money, it is a symbol of success and adulation.

Gouramma is so enamoured of dollars that she loses sight of Vinuta's goodness, tolerance, and innumerable sacrifices she has made to help the family prosper. If Vinuta represents the traditional Indian woman's dignity and quiet service, Jamuna epitomises urban materialistic glamour. Through this Gouramma-Jamuna-Vinuta triad, Murty effectively proves how human love and affection get replaced by material values, when success in money comes to dictate human worth.

The author through the novel attempts to drive home the fact that money offers material solace but does not guarantee emotional fulfilment or a meaningful relation. Gouramma, when she visits America to see Jamuna, finds to her surprise and dismay that there are no warmth, no mutuality, no a sense of belonging in the family of her dollar earning son and daughter-in-law in America. The idea that money could alone create the world as she knew it and could secure love was merely a fantasy. Hence Gouramma's and Shamala's adoration for money reflects a widespread urban materialistic phenomenon where the human relations could even turn out to be a marketable commodity.

The Bakula Tree as a Symbol of Displaced Values

The bakula tree: Murty uses it throughout *Gently Falls the Bakula* as a profound representation of memory, belonging and emotional anchors. As Shrikant and Shrimati are growing up in Hubli, the blossoms of the bakula flower are observers of the romance budding between the two. But when the two are married, Shrikant's insatiable drive in his professional life pushes Shrimati, along with Shrikant, further from his emotional moorings. From the idyllic environs of Hubli, a shift in priorities has the two in the high-octane world of corporate Mumbai, where Shrikant's climb up the corporate ladder comes at the cost of emotional investment in Shrimati. For every rung Shrikant climbs on his ladder of success, he sacrifices on companionship, empathy, and empathy, and not just on free time. Even Shrimati has given up her studies to facilitate her husband's career but after a while, she finds she has become a symbol of her husband, rather than an intellectual in her own right. Her lack of connection can be seen as a symbol of the dehumanising nature of city corporate life where careers trump connections and personal relations. The tree is everything Shrikant gives away in his greed, whether simplicity, empathy, or his deep emotional bonds. And Shrimati, for finally picking herself up, chooses to repossess herself, repossessing all those lost pieces that corporate life and hubris could not touch.

The Erosion of Empathy in the Modern Space

As in her earlier works, Murty continuously highlights how the contemporary urban setting promotes individual growth at the cost of collective accountability. The novel's characters find themselves increasingly absorbed in image, advancement, and material gains, discarding responsibility

toward their relatives in process. In *Dollar Bahu*, family bonds begin to disintegrate when reputation surpasses human relationships.

Everyone in the family starts assessing each other in terms of income, and soon a mutual distrust begins to replace the cordial understanding of the family.

The essays in *Wise and Otherwise* are also strewn with countless real-life episodes in which money and education failed to instill kindness in people. Murty often juxtaposes wealthy people with the underprivileged but the generously endowed. These instances serve to confirm the moral implications raised in her fictional narratives. It is, therefore, implied that not modernization but economic prosperity, superseding ethical accountability poses threat.

Gender and the Burden of Moral Stewardship

A particularly striking feminist theme in Murty's novels is the excessive burden imposed upon women to maintain family morality and tradition. In both *Dollar Bahu* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*, the female characters are expected to be endlessly tolerant, forgiving, emotionally available, and ethically conscientious with minimal recognition for their suffering. Vinuta quietly and selflessly upholds the household yet her sacrifices are dismissed as worthless, lacking financial glamour, Shrimati makes untold personal sacrifices and forgoes educational ambitions for the sake of Shrikant's career achievements.

Male ambition is hailed as commendable, whilst women are to maintain domestic equilibrium regardless.

Murty critically addresses the absurd disparity within the Indian society that readily embraces the notion of modernity yet insists upon women preserving traditional morality exclusively. Men can stride towards success and public life while women remain within the home nurturing domestic values even at considerable personal loss. But Murty does not depict the female protagonists as weak and helpless. Vinuta maintains her composure despite suffering neglect. Shrimati asserts her right to choose intellectual freedom as opposed to being subjugated. Her choice highlights the strength not passive victimhood of her as a woman, arguing that morality does not demand the death of individuality.

Towards a Synthesis: The Rooted Modernist

Murty's works cannot be understood as an outright condemnation of modernity or urban life. On the contrary, her fiction proposes an ethical frame which integrates professional achievement with an emotional compass. Education, economic independence, and international careers are meaningful only when they are underpinned by compassion, gratitude, and modesty. Her idea individual would have the "wings" afforded by the advantages of modern learning and economic progress, grounded in the "roots" of moral values. This individual understands that success loses meaning when it is isolated from others and achieved at the cost of interpersonal bonds. The trials and tribulations of Gouramma, Vinuta, Shrimati, and even Shrikant, demonstrate that an individual's fulfillment cannot be quantified in terms of monetary wealth or professional credentials, but, rather, stems from a synthesis of outward success and inner integrity. Thus, Murty provides a prescription for development which is neither nostalgic nor purely progressive, but offers a way forward, inspired by the enduring values of human relationship, compassion and family, social responsibility.

Conclusion

Murty's work is not a wholesale rejection of modern urban life or a romantic lament of the pre-modern past. Instead her novels envision an ethic where career success goes hand in hand with emotional literacy. While a formal education, financial independence, or an international career may have their significance, they become truly important if accompanied by the grace of empathy, gratitude and humility.

It is a concept of the 'individual with the wings', provided by the opportunities modern learning and progress create, supported by the 'roots' that moral values give.

Such a person realizes that no achievement has real meaning if it stands alone and at the cost of human connections. Whether it is the ordeal of Gouramma, Vinuta, Shrimati, or even the careerist Shrikant, the experience highlights that the true measure of individual well-being is not solely about money or achievements, but an interweaving of external success with integrity. In the end Murty offers a path forward-that is neither nostalgic nor just forward-looking-that is rooted in the eternal virtues of relationship, care and family.

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